

# THE WRIGHT MOMENT

Katie Noonan tells Jane Cornwell how she was drawn into her project with the Brodsky Quartet



A chilly afternoon in Wood Green, suburban north London, and in an old church hall with blacked-out windows Katie Noonan is standing on tiptoe, reaching for a high note. Four musicians on string instruments — two violins, a viola and a cello — sit behind clear glass in an adjoining room, their chords misting and swelling; in front of them all, behind more glass, a recording engineer at a mixing desk slides the occasional control knob.

“The dark preludes of the drums begin / and round us round the company of lovers,” sings Noonan, one hand on her headphones, the heel of her other hand straining towards the ceiling. Featuring words by Australian poet Judith Wright and music by Melbourne composer Paul Grabowsky, the composition both highlights Noonan’s pristine, opera-trained voice and challenges her technical mastery.

“Ooh, what a bitch of a song,” she grins when she’s finished. “My C sharp was too sharp. Can we do it again?”

The players nod good-naturedly. “The harmonics sounded better last time,” offers cellist Jacqueline Thomas of the Brodsky Quartet, the famous chamber music outfit with which Noonan is collaborating. “Let’s give it another chance,” agrees Thomas’s husband, viola player Paul Cassidy, as violinists Ian Belton and Daniel Rowland reposition their instruments under their chins.

Noonan and the Brodskys have come together to record *With Love and Fury*, a song cycle in which poems by Wright (1915–2000) have been set to compositions by 10 of Noonan’s favourite Australian composers.

The album’s release will precede a seven-city Australian tour that begins with a world premiere in Brisbane on April 28. Which seems only fitting; the Armidale, NSW-born Wright was a Queensland resident for more than 30 years. Noonan grew up in Brisbane, lives on the Sunshine Coast and has just been appointed artistic director of the Queensland Music Festival.

Wearing knee-length red boots and indigenous pointillist-design leggings, her peroxidized hair shorn into a quiff, Noonan pauses before burping unselfconsciously. “There you go,” she declares and, airways duly cleared, nails the song on the second take.

With three out of 10 songs still to be recorded, they move on to *To a Child*, a song with music by film composer David Hirschfelder (*Shine, Elizabeth, Australia*) that pulses with innocence and experience.

“When I was a child / I saw a burning bird in a tree.” Noonan’s voice has the handful of people in the mixing room (engineer, intern, studio manager, me) transfixed. “I see became I am / I am became I see.”

“Lovely,” mutters the engineer, sitting back, as the rest of us break into applause.

Noonan’s easy professionalism belies the fact she flew into London just a few days earlier, and with an airline that briefly misplaced her luggage. For 24 hours, acclimatising at the home of Thomas and Cassidy, she wore the same pyjamas and slippers she was wearing when she walked off the plane. The mother of two boys, the author of a successful and resolutely independent 20-year musical career, Noonan has learned to take things in her stride.

“I knew my suitcase would turn up,” she says in her confident, good-natured way. “I’m not supposed to be separated from these tights, or these boots.”

The notion that things are meant to be pervades *With Love and Fury*, a project named after a book by Wright and the phrase with which the poet signed off her letters. Noonan came late to Wright’s poetry but is a long-time fan of the Brodskys, a British group that has worked with vocalists such as Elvis Costello, Bjork and Paul McCartney, and released more than 50 recordings, including the works of Britten and Shostakovich. The Brodskys have toured the world, playing its great concert halls, usually standing up instead of sitting down. They’ve diversified without ever selling out.

“I remember hearing *The Juliet Letters* [the Brodskys’ 1993 collaboration with Costello] and just going ‘wow,’” says Noonan, when we meet in a cafe next to a mixing studio in Shoreditch, east London, the following day. “It was this genuine combination of pop and classical,

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